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C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 001214

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SUBJECT: PRIVY COUNCILLOR/FORMER ARMY COMMANDER ON STATE OF PLAY

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce reason 1.4 (b) (d)

1. (C) SUMMARY: Retired Army Commander and current Privy Counselor General Surayud Chulanont told the Ambassador on February 28 that the political situation was "a mess" while asserting that there was no interest on the part of the military in getting involved. Similarly, he said that the King was not choosing sides. He was critical of Thaksin's corruption, but assessed that the PM still enjoyed strong support among his core constituency up-country. End summary.

2. (C) The Ambassador met on February 28 with Gen. Surayud Chulanont, a highly-respected member of the King's Privy Council and a retired Army Commander, to discuss the current political situation. Surayud described the political situation as "a mess." He said that two "willful" characters, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and Dharma Army leader Chamlong Srimuang, were locked in a confrontation. Surayud said that Chamlong was no longer as important as he had been in 1992, when he led the democracy demonstrations that brought down the military government, but he still has a lot of influence. Chamlong's leadership of the "Santi Asoke" religious sect gives him control of a large number of followers (the Dharma Army) that he can turn out for demonstrations. His sudden involvement in the anti-Thaksin movement has exacerbated the "no compromise" nature of the confrontation.

THE KING IS NEUTRAL

3. (C) Surayud said that the King was not taking sides. Nonetheless, both sides were trying to drag him in. Media firebrand Sondhi Limthongkul had taken the lead, with his constant references to the King in his weekly demonstrations. Thaksin has played this card as well. (Comment: For example, in his weekly radio address right before the February 4 demonstrations, Thaksin commented that the King "only had to whisper in his ear" and he'd resign. Surayud said that Thaksin's comment caused great perturbation among the Thai and was an inappropriate reference to the monarch. End comment.) The King's focus is on preserving the monarchy, according to Surayud. The King also, naturally, wants there to be no violence.

THE ARMY IS NEUTRAL

4. (C) The military also doesn't want to intervene on either side, according to Surayud. He admitted that there had been "some talk" within the military about the option of a "one-day" coup which would turn power over to the King. (Some of this has been picked up by the press.) But Surayud said he had spoken directly to Army Commander Sonthi (a Surayud protege) and he absolutely did not support such a move. Surayud noted with discomfort that his name has been mentioned as a possible interim Prime Minister in case of a coup, and said that he was keeping a very low profile in order to avoid fueling such speculation.

CORRUPTION

5. (C) Surayud noted that, while the Democrats had been trying to run the country in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis, businessman Thaksin had made himself master of the ins and outs of the new constitution. Once in office, he had weakened the institutions set up by the constitution as a limit on the PM's power. Surayud recalled talking to Thaksin early in the PM's first term, and warning him that he had to avoid the taint of corruption, since the Thai people would not stand for that. Surayud, referring to the controversial Shin Corp sale, commented, "I guess he just couldn't help himself." However, despite the outrage by the Bangkok elite, Surayud felt that Thaksin was still popular with the people who form the core of his support: the poor, farmers, and the working class, particularly up-country.

6. (C) Comment: We think Surayud is right on all counts. Rumors of coup plotting can be expected to circulate widely, given the military's previous role. As things stand now, we do not believe that the military wants to step in, nor does the King want to be caught in the middle. Unfortunately, it

is not yet clear how this confrontation between the two  
"willful" sides can be resolved.  
BOYCE